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Our Faith

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Christmas

CHARLES E. PARK
(Minister Emeritus, First Church of Boston)

Age cannot wither it, nor custom stale its infinite variety. Most of our holidays are woven of the fabric of memory, and ask us to recall some great life or achievement in the past. By contrast, Christmas has an inexhaustible vitality because it is woven of the fabric of hope, and asks us to contemplate a far-off divine event, to which the whole creation moves. We have often said that Jesus of Nazareth lived two thousand years before his time. But men in the year 3949 will say that he lived four thousand years before his time. His place is ahead of us, not behind us. It is true that

Dim tracts of time divide
Those golden days from me;

but they are tracts of future time as well as past time. He holds his place in our thoughts with a strange tenacity; we cannot forget him; it is hard to overtake him.

That men have exalted him to super-human power and dignity is nothing to wonder at. Yet we can never forget that a super-human dignity was the one thing that he himself most strenuously denied. He was one of us, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. What he was we can be; what he did we can do. Otherwise, if he were on a level above our level, a being of some higher order, then his life, his words, his example, his hope, his trust, his self-sacrifice are at once robbed of every shred of significance for us. Unless every new-born babe is, at least potentially, a replica of the Babe of Bethlehem; unless every man can look into that little face and recognize himself, so far as we are concerned the manger might as well stand empty. There was a reason for the name he best loved: the Son of Man. He asks nothing more than to be our everlasting prototype; he is satisfied with nothing less.

There is no escape from Jesus of Nazareth. We may cry with the demons: Thou Son of the Most High, art thou come to torment us before the time? And he answers us with ringing exultation: Yes, before the time, after the time, all the time; to torment you with my scorn for the empty excuses you plead, with my denial of your craven deprecation of self, with my rebuke for your needless self-betrayal, with my challenge to the manhood that you know is yours, waiting to be realized. Now, rise up and follow me, for you are a son of God, and an instrument of his holy purpose.

It is a barren Christmas that does not bring to us that sting of rebuke, that brightness of hope, and that promise of daily, helpful, trustful brotherhood.

A Christmas Prayer

N. W. LOVELY
(Minister, Unitarian Church, San Antonio, Texas)

O Source of Life, by whose inspiration Jesus of Nazareth did reveal to his own age the moral power of human faith and the divine beauty of religious living, so dwell in us this Christmas season that the memory of his birth will become in us an assurance and a promise of thy continuing presence among men. Teach us to believe that among shepherds and wise men, in courts and temples, in taverns and stables, the power and the glory of thy purposed kingdom is present to abase the proud, to destroy the stubborn, but to honor and advance the wise and the humble, the men of good will, the honest, the just, and the merciful.

Help us to look beyond the intrigues of the mighty and their massacre of innocents, to see the great hosts of decent and kindly people whose desire is peace, whose ways are generous, whose manners are friendly.

And in the light of that star which guides the truly wise and humble sons of men, let us find the path of life. Amen.

Christmas Thoughts

HAZEL ROGERS GREDLER

The time of Christmas and of peace on earth:
We sing of shepherds and a glowing star;
Can these things be, within a world grown old
With strife? We look in vain for angels' wings
And strain our ears for songs of love and light.

And then in fancy free, we call to mind
That simple home of long ago, and see
The little mother Mary, as she sits
Beside the fire, while in the dusk so warm
And sweet, she rocks her Babe within her sheltered
Arms. The fire leaps up and falls, but Mary
Dreams of kings in silken robes who bowed
Before her boy, beneath that gleaming star.

The years fly on and we who dream and work
For love and life, see only blood-drenched flowers
Along the way, and myriad souls who perished
For the right. Yet suddenly amid
The darkness and the strife there comes a Voice
That lifts the heavy weight about our hearts
And brings us once again the singing strength
Of dawn. "Dear Souls—there is no hope, no way,
No truth, no life but leads through Christmas Day!"

That is Christmas

CLAYTON B. HALE
(Minister, Channing Church, Rockland, Mass.)

Christmas weaves a spell. As Christmas draws near a mood comes on that is akin to the mood of those who first felt its magic—those shepherds, those wise men, those awed and wondering parents. Everything feels different to you. You yourself are different. A new joy wells up in you. You go through the days in a kind of wonderment.

That mood is what makes Christmas. Unless you experience it in some wise you have not had Christmas. You have only one more of the year's merrymakings.

The giving and receiving of gifts is not Christmas. Dear as the custom is, it is only the external wrappings of Christmas. But when the stars seem to blink brighter, when the air seems vibrant with unheard angelic voices, when the soul leaps up to meet a new sense of the more than finite meaning of life, when the whole being opens itself to consciousness of the brooding Spirit of God—*that is Christmas.*

To open yourself wide to the spirit that was in Jesus, to give that spirit a chance to enter into you and to possess you—*that is Christmas.* To love until it seems as if the heart would burst from loving, and to make yourself the eager instrument of love—*that is Christmas.*

The Eternal Christmas

W. WALDEMAR W. ARGOW
(Minister, First Unitarian Church, Baltimore, Md.)

It is a long pain-pierced and tear-stained way from insensate nebula to unmoral star dust; from star dust to rapacious savage; from savage to divine martyr. At first it was but physical law of affinity, then natural law of survival, then the spiritual law of the sacrifice of the fittest for the unfit. Once blindness, then dumb instinct, at last willing sacrifice. Once the atom, then the claw, then the heart. Once it was eruption and collision, then hate and revenge, at last love and good will. Once the sun patrolling space, then Pithecanthropus hunting with club, at last Jesus dying for others on the cross. Once eleven dismayed disciples smitten with despair, today millions of happy hope-impelled souls doing good for the joy of doing. Man's spiritual nature is God's Christmas present to the unfolding ages.

A Parable of Epistemology

ROWLAND GRAY-SMITH
(Minister, New North Church, Hingham, Mass.)

What is water? I asked a man to whom the whole world directed me. With analytic eye he marked the qualities that water shares with water everywhere, in teardrop and raindrop, in dewdrop and lake, in living stream and stagnant pool, in fresh spring and salty sea. He said: "Water is everywhere just what it is. Water is H_2O."

Then I sailed with a ship beneath the southern cross, searching for a fallen plane. The crew was found, half-dead upon the life-raft. They were past all speech. Two syllables alone their parched lips sought to frame. "Water!" They drank and they lived.

And then I asked an Ancient of Days. Three mighty men had hewn their way to bring for him a draught of water from his best-loved well at Bethlehem. He took it in his hands, and, lo, its hue was changed. He would not drink it. "It is blood," he said, "the blood of men who went in jeopardy of their lives." And he poured it out as an offering unto God.

Which of the three, do you think, knew best what water was?

A Striking Prophecy

Made in 1868 by EDMUND H. SEARS, author of "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear," in an article, "The Unitarian Denomination," *Monthly Religious Magazine.*

In America the great denominations that move on with renewed vigor to the work of Christian civilization and education, as the new golden opportunities arise, do not make their theologies less Christian, but more so, and the Christ in them gives to them both their aggressive power and their inspiring song.

Our Unitarian rationalism has not shown itself as yet the advanced thought of the times, but the very smallest among the reflex eddies under the lee shore, while the vast current of the world's progress is sweeping brightly and grandly by.

We can get stuck and finally swamped on one of these little side eddies if we will; and then the other denominations, advancing with the ideas which we have ignobly abandoned, will do the work which we ought to have done, — or, as we pray and believe will be the case, we can be true to the historic urgencies and pledges of the denomination — and then it is plain to see, at least it is plain to us, there is a point not far in the distance where we shall be at one with all the advancing denominations, fulfilling as never before the words of the Master, "I in them and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them as thou hast loved me."

The Rebirth of Christianity

(Selected)

"Christianity is forever being reborn; its eternal truth is forever being rediscovered as men find in it the ratification, the explanation, and the consolation of their own deepest and most shattering experience.

"The time has been, and still is, when the Christian faith was divorced from the common life of men; when their religion was one thing and their daily experience was another. But all that is changing, and changing with a terrible swiftness. Our inescapable destiny is to live in a time of the breaking of nations. More and more travail of soul is bound to become the common experience of us all. Day by day more and more of us are being torn from our moorings by the great tempest of world events — our moorings in habits of thought and habits of action. We move tremblingly like naked, new-born things in a strange world, a world in agony.

"In such a world Christianity was born; in such a world Christianity will be born again. It will be the same Christianity, in the sense that Christianity, unlike all other high religions, has within itself the power to rise from its own ashes. Its own devastation is its deliverance. All that human mind can endure of truth, and all the truth the human mind cannot endure is the nourishment of the Christian's faith, the opportunity of the Christian's experience. Not seeking for less truth than the other man can suffer, but more, not for part of the truth, but all of it, such is the purpose with which a Christian looks at the world."

JOHN MIDDLETON MURRY

Freedom From Want

KNUT HALLE
(Chairman, Flatbush Unitarian Service Committee)

"For I was hungry and ye gave me meat; I was thirsty and ye gave me drink; I was a stranger and ye took me in."

We Unitarians have some bad habits, and so have all other religious groups. The worst fault we must find with ourselves is that we are preaching the word but forgetting the deed. Now the word is important. In the halls of our churches and meeting houses, communion in fellowship brings us nearer to the many with whom we worship the same God, the same Christ as Leader and Master, the same brotherhood in humanity.

But while we talk about this brotherhood, all too often we forget to act it. Yet some of us who are active volunteers in the Unitarian Service Committee tend to lean the other way. We work in the service, according to the word of the Master, but forget the communion in fellowship.

Which, then, is the more important — the word or the deed? I for one and the many who are with me in the Unitarian Service Committee, as in other service committees, such as the Friends, are convinced that Jesus admonished us all to think of the deed first. And Jesus' own teachings on earth, his own performance of constant acts of mercy, appear to bear out our contentions.

A new year is before us. It will bring tears and strife, sun and rain, laughter and sorrow. To those who need our help it must bring the freedom from want that they are entitled to, and which we, Unitarian Christians, are taught by our Master to help bring to the world.

Faith's Living Foundation

CARL BIHLDORFF
(Minister, First Parish, Brookline, Mass.)

At this season, centuries ago, the heart of a bride glowed with hope as she awaited the advent of her first-born. She had faith that her child would be a blessing to their home, bring honor to his parents, and in their sunset years provide them with companionship and comfort.

When Joseph died the family looked to Jesus; but he, conscious of a deeper claim upon his life, left their midst. When Mary heard that her son's teachings were incurring the enmity and wrath of the Pharisees and Levites, she sought his presence—to save him; but he, heeding not her entreaty, said, "Who is my mother? Whosoever doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven." And at last, as she stood beneath the cross her ebbing faith changed to bitter despair.

In what can anyone have faith? If we are to be saved from the anguish which comes when our human hopes seem to fail, we must stop identifying them with faith. Our hopes are as grass—they wither and die. But true faith is never at the mercy of human circumstance. Its foundation is God. It is an affirmative trust in the Eternal which says, "Not my will, but thine be done."

Liberals, however, often have difficulty maintaining such an affirmative faith, for we want enough evidence to prove its truth before we avail ourselves of its uplifting power. Is there a God, we ask.

Ancient philosophies sought to prove the existence of God, by methods teleological, ontological, and cosmological. But even when one is convinced of the soundness of their methods, the question of God's nature remains problematic.

Where may the answer be found? Where but in the events of history? And Christmas is one such event.

To be sure, the birth of Jesus is not a decisive answer, for Herod was as much a fact as Bethlehem's babe. Human sinfulness and selfishness were present on that fateful day. But this supreme fact remains: creative life brought forth the Christ child. We may interpret life in terms of the best it has produced. We should not forget that the message of Christmas is rooted in an historic fact. And it is this fact that gives depth to our faith in God. The revelation in Jesus and in all Christlike lives is our guide to an understanding of God's nature; it is the strong and enduring foundation of our faith.

International Accent

The first fall meeting of the Unitarian Christian Fellowship was held at Arlington Street Church, Boston, on October 31, with people from about a score of churches present.

After supper, Rev. Paul H. Chapman gave an illustrated address on the Congress of the International Association for Liberal Christianity and Religious Freedom which he attended last summer in Amsterdam.

Those interested in the widespread liberal movement within Christianity may like to read *Ideas and Facts* published by the I. A. L. C. R. F. The Unitarian Christian Fellowship can supply copies at 25 cents each.

Beginning next month OUR FAITH will publish articles to be contributed by religious liberals in Europe.

The next meeting of the U. C. F. will be held on November 28 at the Second Church in Boston.

Editorial Announcement

The Editorial Board of OUR FAITH *wishes to pay tribute to Rev. Harvey Swanson who inspired the Unitarian Christian Fellowship to begin this publication and who served for two and a half years as its first editor.*

Instead of appointing a successor to Mr. Swanson, the full responsibility for editing and supervising the publication has fallen upon the shoulders of the seven members of the Editorial Board.

Christina Gray-Smith has become Managing Editor, a position she formerly held on the staff of the "Christian Register."

OUR FAITH is published monthly, from October to May, by the Unitarian Christian Fellowship, 27 Marlborough St., Boston 16, Mass. (Sybil H. Holmes, Chairman; Rev. Paul H. Chapman, Executive Secretary; Constant Wendell, Treasurer.)

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Copies of OUR FAITH in quantity may be secured, for distribution in local parishes, and for literature tables.

Articles for publication in OUR FAITH are welcome from all who wish to use these columns to express Unitarian Christianity.